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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the use of standardized testing in a university-based executive training program in Japan. The program is an English language, cross-cultural, and business training program offered to Japanese and Chinese businesspersons preparing to enter the international business world. Reports on students, sent to their companies, summarize program activities, student progress, student skills and participation level, and standardized English test scores. A study was undertaken to assess: (1) how, if at all, changes in test scores reflected changes in student capabilities, (2) program stakeholders' perceptions of the practical value of the scores, and (3) dilemmas posed by use of the scores in student and program reporting and program marketing. Data were gathered from programs from 1992 through 1997 and analyzed in this context. It is concluded that while the program cannot abandon use of the test and its scores, it also cannot continue to use test data exclusively to promote the program. Additional information is being sought from sponsoring companies concerning in-house skill measurement and training, employee skill improvements they expect from program participation, information they would like included in student reports, and importance the company attaches to use of the test and its scores. (MSE)

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Assessment Dilemmas in a Language and Cross-cultural Training Program

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Abstract

The presenters will discuss the challenge of balancing qualitative assessment with standardized scores in an executive training program in Japan. They will examine TOEIC scores from their training programs, comparing them with other assessment means, and suggest ways to deal with companies' emphasis on TOEIC gains.

Introduction

The Intensive International Executive Program, or IIEP, is an English, cross-cultural, and business training program held four times each year at the International University of Japan (IUJ), in rural Niigata Prefecture. Participants in the IIEP are Japanese and Chinese business people who are preparing to enter the international business world, usually by taking a bilingual post in Japan or China or by going overseas.

At the end of each program the IIEP instructors prepare a Report to Company, which is sent to the company personnel director or the participants' division chiefs. Each report summarizes the major activities of each program, describes the progress made by the participant, comments on the adaptability, cross-cultural skills, leadership, and participation levels of the participant, and reports on the participants' scores on the Test of English for International Communication, or TOEIC, which is administered twice during each program.

Over the years it has become clear that TOEIC is the only English language assessment that is familiar to all the stakeholders in the IIEP, defined as the program participants, program instructors, and administrative officers and staff related to both, i.e., at IUJ and at the sponsoring companies. Programs that achieve a substantial average TOEIC increase are deemed successes by many program stakeholders, and the effectiveness of programs that did not end in TOEIC gains for their employees has been questioned by these participants and their sponsoring companies.

Recognizing that TOEIC cannot be eliminated from the program, the IIEP has developed several additional methods of measuring and reporting progress, participation, leadership, and other performance and skills categories, but the primary administrative stakeholders in the program and many participants continue to focus on TOEIC. In an attempt to accurately convey to companies what they can expect from individual IIEPs (of four-, eight-, and 10-week duration) in terms of TOEIC gains, the IIEP instructors examined the results from 400 TOEICs from the period 1992 - 1997.

Parts of this analysis are reported below. To summarize, the analysis found no

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pattern of TOEIC improvement that could be used to help companies match participants to individual programs or to predict the success of their participants in any single program. The corollary of this is of course that the IIEP is unable to predict individual or program gains based on program-specific average TOEIC increases from past programs.

Background on the IIEP and the use of TOEIC

In 1990 and 1991 the IIEP ran as a morning course in IUJ's Intensive English Program (IEP). The IEP prepares entering IUJ students for their two-year course of study in either international management or international relations. IIEP participants met for three hours Monday through Friday in a course entitled "Text Skills IIEP." This course dealt with business case studies, cross-cultural readings and activities, and leading meetings and discussions.

In the afternoons the IIEP participants were integrated with the IEP communication skills classes, which focused almost exclusively on presentation skills. The IIEP participants also took part in all IEP curricular and social activities, as well as the IEP pre- and post-program testing. This testing included TOEFL, and from 1990 through 1993 all IIEP participants took the TOEFL twice – at the beginning and end of the program.

In 1992 the IIEP ran separate from the IEP except for major social activities and computer instruction, which combined IIEP and IEP participants. At the request of company sponsors and at the suggestion of key IUJ administrators, the IIEP introduced TOEIC during the 1992 program as an optional addition to the required TOEFL exam. In 1992 half the participants chose to take both tests. In 1993 all but one participant took both. From 1993 the TOEFL was dropped, and TOEIC took its place.

The Current Program

In January 1996 the IIEP began to run throughout the year, as an eight-week Winter Program, a ten-week Summer Program, and four-week Fall and Spring Programs. All four programs follow the same basic daily schedule, divided into morning classes devoted to language instruction, and afternoon classes devoted to business training and cross-cultural activities.

The Morning Class curriculum is divided into two 90-minute classes that meet five days a week and total 15 hours of weekly instruction. The first class, International Business English, is built around a Business English text and listening and speaking skills are emphasized. The second class, Communication Skills for International Managers, consists mainly of participants leading Business Meetings and delivering Oral Presentations. The underlying philosophy of the Morning Class is to provide a familiar teacher-led environment during the first class and then move to a more participant-led focus in the second.

Business Writing plays a secondary role in the Morning Classes. Participants write weekly Business Journals on specific business topics, which are commented upon and corrected for both content and grammar. Other assessment in the Morning

Classes includes weekly comprehension quizzes and videotaped Oral Presentations and Business Meetings. Comments from the teacher about participants on Business Journals, quizzes, presentations, and meetings are given in the final Reports to Company.

Afternoon sessions offer a wide variety of activities organized by IUJ's MBA and international relations faculty, including cross-cultural activities and interaction with IUJ's international student body and frequent business presentations given by participants based on Internet research into business and culture in Asia. Afternoon assessments evaluate participation levels, oral presentations, case discussion skills, cross-cultural management skills, and leadership skills based on observations made by the IIEP and IUJ MBA and international relations faculty. Outstanding achievements by each participant on any afternoon activity are described in the Report to Company.

IIEP Stakeholders and TOEIC

IIEP stakeholders include all those at IUJ and at the sponsoring companies who have a stake, or interest, in ensuring that the program is effective. Table 1 shows the attitudes toward TOEIC held by the major IIEP stakeholders.

Table 1: IIEP Stakeholders and their Attitudes toward TOEIC

Program Stakeholders	General Stakeholder Attitudes toward TOEIC
program participants	Varied. About one half report that TOEIC scores are required for promotion or for postings overseas
personnel staff of sponsoring companies	Virtually all report that TOEIC is used in the company, along with "Eiken" rankings.
division or section chiefs at sponsoring companies	Anecdotal evidence is clear: Middle-level management expect participants to return to the office with TOEIC increases.
IIEP visiting instructors	Generally negative to neutral about TOEIC, particularly about TOEIC preparatory sessions.
IIEP staff	Recognize the importance of the TOEIC, and assist in the administration of the test.
IUJ management from the business world	Stress the importance of TOEIC to potential sponsors, but recognize that communicative skills are more important.
IIEP and IUJ marketing staff in Tokyo and Niigata	Place great importance on TOEIC gains, and include mention of program gains in all IIEP ad materials.
IUJ MBA and International Relations content faculty who contribute to the IIEP	Increasingly aware of the language learning goals of the program, but TOEIC is far from their primary concerns.

Problems with the TOEIC: Reporting and Marketing Dilemmas

The presence of TOEIC in the IIEP creates the expectation from most stakeholders that TOEIC scores will increase during the program. While 80% of all IIEP TOEIC scores have increased, these gains have not been consistent or predictable from one program to the next, causing some corporate stakeholders to question the quality of individual IIEPs and raising the question of what companies can expect from each program in terms of TOEIC.

While maintaining the TOEIC in the program, the IIEP instructors have sought ways to influence the importance corporate sponsors place on TOEIC. This can be seen in the different ways that TOEIC has been dealt with in the Report to Company.

Table 2: Reporting TOEIC Results to Sponsoring Companies

Program	Reporting TOEIC Results
Summer 92	No mention of TOEIC scores on the official report. Scores and a brief analysis of them given in a personal letter written to each participant.
Summer 93	TOEIC scores included at the end of the company report, along with class averages for the test. TOEIC is not mentioned in the program summary at the beginning of the report.
Summer 94	TOEIC included on first page of the report, along with TOEFL scores and the results of an in-house oral proficiency exam. No mention of TOEIC in the text of the report.
Summer 95	TOEIC listed prominently in second section of the report, along with details of each participant's score and their score relative to the group. Attempt at explaining TOEIC losses.
Winter 96	TOEIC score listed in section 1 of the report. Program vocabulary test scores included alongside TOEIC scores. Attempt made to stress that TOEIC is but one element of the program's testing and evaluation.
Spring 96	TOEIC mentioned in a single sentence at the end of the report. Only the first, second, and gain/loss figures are given.
Summer 96	TOEIC included for the first time in the program summary at the beginning of the report. TOEIC results moved to the end of the report.
Fall 96	TOEIC moves back to the first section of the report, with a disclaimer that TOEIC scores were not as encouraging as they had been in the past.
Winter 97	TOEIC moves back to the penultimate section of the report.
Spring 97	TOEIC on the first page of the report.
Fall 97	TOEIC comprises first major section of the report, following the summary, and for the first time comparisons are made with previous TOEIC scores achieved by participants from the same companies. Increases relative to other participants are included when favorable for the participant. Report mentions past average TOEIC increases for the initial TOEIC score range of the participant, but only when the participant exceeds the average for that range.

The Scores

TOEIC is mentioned in all IIEP marketing materials, yet it is not clear from the TOEIC scores just who will achieve TOEIC gains in which program. Nor is it clear which aspects of any individual program can be offered as an explanation of why any single TOEIC score rose or fell during the program. Table 3 shows the size of each program, the amount of time devoted to TOEIC prep, score ranges, and the percentage of each group that did not show any TOEIC increase.

Table 3: TOEIC Related to Program Size, Number of TOEIC Prep Hours, Average TOEIC Increase, Range of TOEIC Scores, Percentage with No TOEIC Gains, and Range of TOEIC Entry Scores

Program	Size	TOEIC Prep Hours	Average Increase	High Gain	Low Gain	Range of Gain	% with No Gain	High/Low Entry TOEIC Range
Summer 92	28	0	19	140	-65	205	33	220
Summer 93	29	0	21	120	-110	230	40	385
Summer 94	39	0	135	275	0	275	3	650
Summer 95	28	0	37	150	-55	205	24	405
Winter 96	5	2	5	265	-40	305	50	270
Spring 96	6	2	101	115	90	25	0	160
Summer 96	25	4	93	265	-40	305	6	510
Fall 96	7	4	1	55	-40	95	57	550
Winter 97	7	4	126	235	35	200	0	495
Spring 97	11	6	27	115	-75	190	33	275
Summer 97	23	12	106	250	-30	280	5	500
Fall 97	9	4	38	120	-30	150	22	535

To summarize, the overall pattern of TOEIC increase is encouraging, but it is difficult to capture the TOEIC gain/loss patterns for any individual program, or from one program to the next. This is true also for the relationship between entry-level TOEIC scores and TOEIC gains. When viewed collectively, the scores show that entry TOEIC scores from 200 - 600 have achieved the greatest gains, as might be expected. However, this is far too great a range to be of use to companies who have to select participants for the program, and in any case the entry/gain argument breaks down at the program level, i.e., when entry level scores for each program are compared to the individual TOEIC increases for the participants in those programs.

Reporting TOEIC: Anomalies

Adding to the overall problem of reporting TOEIC scores to sponsoring companies are those scores that seem to be anomalies, as for example when two participants from the same company with similar skills achieve very different TOEIC gains, when a participant strong in every other area drops in score, or when a participant's listening and reading increases vary to a great degree. Table 4 lists listening and reading increases for 19 participants whose listening/reading improvements differed by 100 or more points.

Table 4: TOEIC Anomalies

Listening Improvement	Reading Improvement	Range
180	-40	220
110	5	115
105	-5	110
105	-40	145
95	-40	130
80	-45	125
70	-30	100
45	-120	165
10	110	120
5	125	130
0	120	120
-10	105	115
-10	95	105
-15	125	140
-30	95	125
-45	65	110
-55	45	100
-60	45	105
-75	80	155

It always tempting to ascribe drops in reading scores to the participant's inability to finish the TOEIC in time. However, only one listening/reading improvement pair (45/-120) in Table 4 would warrant this explanation.

The Future: Alternative Approaches to TOEIC

The IIEP accepts the challenge of training any participant, regardless of their English language skills, and each program is tailor-made for each group, within the common morning and afternoon framework discussed above. The program instructors begin to make adaptations to each program as soon as participants applications begin to arrive, generally 2 - 6 weeks before each program, and continue to do so until the last week of each program.

Also, the IIEP trains and evaluates each group independently of other groups. Participants enter the IIEP only once, and so cannot be tracked from one program to another, or from one level to another. Indeed, the concept of level does not fit with the IIEP in general – participants arrive with different skills sets, respond to challenges of various types with those skills sets, and are assessed as individuals according to how well they were able to apply and expand their skills during the program. Consequently, the Report to Company concentrates on what each participant did, how much they participated, to what degree and in what areas they progressed, and what kind of training the participant should pursue after the program.

Given the importance of TOEIC in Japan, its familiarity with the IIEP stakeholders, and recent assurances from ETS that the test will be improved in the near future,

the IIEP cannot afford to give up the TOEIC. At the same time, as this paper has tried to show, the IIEP also cannot sell TOEIC increases to its sponsoring companies on a program-to-program basis, despite the fact that 80% of IIEP participants have achieved TOEIC gains over the years.

Rather than attempt to alter the IIEP to achieve more reliable program-specific TOEIC gains, and rather than create an in-house assessment system that is unlikely to replace TOEIC in the minds of sponsoring companies, the IIEP has begun to gather more information from companies: (1) about how sponsoring companies measure English improvement in-house, and what kind of training they provide; (2) about what improvements they expect their participants to make in the IIEP; (3) about what specific information they would like to have included in the Report to Company; and (4) about the relationship between each participant and TOEIC, i.e., the importance they attach to TOEIC, how many times they have taken it, their experience with other standardized tests, what self-study or organized English courses they have pursued, what score they hope to attain during the program, and to what extent they would like to be a part of TOEIC prep classes during each program.

The goal is to make TOEIC an individual priority, not a program one, and so an aspect of each program that we can report to companies in terms of the individual participant's needs and focus. Reaching this goal would bring the TOEIC in line with other elements of the IIEP that focus on individual achievement.